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ABSTRACT

Many teachers of adult learners of English have found dialogue journals, interactive writing with a teacher or other individual, to be an important part of their classes. Dialogue journals not only open new channels of communication, but they also provide natural contexts for language and literacy development. When adult learners write with their teachers, they have opportunities to learn English in a supportive, non-threatening interaction with a proficient English speaker who has knowledge of life in the United States. Because the interaction is written, it allows learners to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing. Dialogue journal writing is consistent with a learner-centered curriculum, in which learners write to express themselves, to make sense of their own and others' experiences, and to develop their abilities. This Q&A defines dialogue journals, explains the benefits (extended contact time with learners; management of classes with learners of varying language, ability, and interest levels; effective assessment of learner needs and progress; and general facilitation of language learning); outlines the challenges (correctness of the writing; finding the time to respond to learners' writing; writing that can sometimes be overly personal); and discusses the logistics (materials, frequency and length of writing, writing instructions and topics, and journal partners). (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (Contains 14 references.) (KFT)

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Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy

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Teachers of adults often wish that they had more time to communicate with the learners in their classes—to learn about their backgrounds, interests, and needs; to share experiences and information; and to track and document learners' developing knowledge and abilities. The need to communicate is intensified with adults learning English as a second language (ESL). They bring to the classroom extensive life experience and proficiencies in different languages and cultures. At the same time, they may have limited literacy skills in their native language, have had little or no schooling in their country, and have suffered trauma in their transition from their native country to the United States (Isserlis, 2000), all of which affect their learning. If they are new arrivals to the United States, they are adjusting to a new way of life at the same time that they are learning a new language and beginning to function in a new educational or work setting. It is with these learners that one-to-one communication is crucial—as part of a larger ongoing adjustment process and as a way for teachers to get to know them, understand their levels of knowledge and language skills, and address their particular language and literacy needs.

Many teachers of adults learning English have found *dialogue journals*, interactive writing with a teacher or other individual, to be an important part of their classes. Dialogue journals not only open new channels of communication, but they also provide natural contexts for language and literacy development. When adult learners write with their teachers, they have opportunities to use English in a supportive, nonthreatening interaction with a proficient English speaker who has knowledge of life in the United States. Because the interaction is written, it allows learners to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing.

Dialogue journal writing is consistent with a learner-centered curriculum orientation, in which learners write to express themselves, to make sense of their own and others' experiences, and to develop their abilities (Auerbach, 1999; Isserlis, 1996). This type of writing can also be an important component of a critical inquiry approach (Van Duzer & Florez, 1999), as learners and teachers think critically together about texts and events that affect them and respond in writing.

What Are Dialogue Journals?

Dialogue journals are written conversations in which a learner and teacher (or other writing partner) communicate regularly (daily, weekly, or on a schedule that fits the educational setting) over a semester, school year, or course. Learners write as much as they choose on a wide range of topics and in a variety of genres and styles. The teacher writes back regularly, responding to questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is primarily a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the learner rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the quality of the learner's writing. Topics for or types of writing may be specified to enhance the curriculum, and some correction may be given by the teacher, but the primary goal of the writing is communication.

The first documented use of dialogue journals was in the 1980s with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers, in California (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Peyton & Staton, 1993). Many teachers, however, report having communicated with their adult learners through journal writing before this. They are now used in many different educational settings—with adults and children, with native and nonnative English speakers, in many different languages, and in teacher and volunteer training programs (Peyton & Staton, 1996).

The following example, excerpted from dialogue journal entries written by an adult learner and her teacher, illustrates the nature of the writing and ways it can fit into the larger curriculum. This interaction, which continues for over a month, occurred when "Elizabeth" (a pseudonym) responded to a comment by the teacher about the health of her child. Elizabeth wrote at length about the fact that the child had been born prematurely. This led to discussion in class about health care, prenatal care, and women's issues generally, and to this written interaction about "Sami" (a pseudonym), Elizabeth's son.

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October 2

Elizabeth: ...Sami is better because He take medice. thank for your answer. I and my family are well. And we had a good weekend. thank my Dear teacher. ...

October 23

Teacher: ...How old is Sami now? Does he sometimes watch TV in English? I think he's lucky, because he is growing up hearing 2 languages—he'll be able to know Spanish and English. Do your other kids speak both languages, too?

October 23

Elizabeth: ... Sami have 2 1/2 year old. When He Born He weingh 2 Pounds now he have 27 Pounds. he Barn from only sixth month. Some times he watch cartoons But he like played with her toys. He Can said some words in English. Yes my other Kids speak English and Spanish.

October 30

Teacher: ... and about Sami—I'm happy that he's growing up. I didn't know that he was born 3 months early. He's a great kid. Do you think you'll want to have any more children?

October 30

Elizabeth: ...I'm very happy too by my son Sami he is very active and entilgent I want more chdren. My husband want a girls. But the Doctor's say I can have not more because is danger for me. But anyway I want more children.

November 16

Elizabeth: [In response to the teacher's questions about the possible danger of having more children] ...the Doctor say is dangerous By my Hight Pleasurre [high blood pressure]. Now I have another Doctor is a woman Doctor But she is very nice.

(From Isserlis, 1996, pp. 58-59. Reprinted with permission.)

As this example illustrates, learners can write in dialogue journals about topics that are important to them in the genres and styles matched to their needs and abilities. The writing may include descriptions, narratives, complaints, or arguments with supporting details, as the topic and communicative purposes dictate. It does not need to be constrained by teacher- or curriculum-established topics or by a preset schedule of topics and genres that must be covered in sequence. Sometimes it might focus on personal and family concerns and interests, at others on academic or work-related issues. In this example, the journal writing grew out of a theme (personal and children's health) that the class was working on together. In other cases, topics raised in the journal can lead to themes that the class then pursues together. (See McGrail, 1996, for an example.)

There is no initial pressure for learners with limited literacy skills to write. They may begin their journal work by using a few words or by drawing pictures, with the teacher drawing pictures in reply, perhaps writing a few words underneath or labeling the pictures. Learners may also dictate their entries to the teacher, an aide, or another learner who writes them down, writes a reply, and reads the reply aloud. The move to writing and reading letters, words, and longer texts can be made when learners are ready. (See Holt, 1995, for discussion of ways to work with adult learners with limited literacy.) In classes focusing on native language literacy, the writing can be done in the learners' native languages. The move to English can occur in line with course goals and learner readiness, or, if the goal of the course is native language development and the teacher is proficient in the language, the journal interaction can continue in the language throughout the course.

Because the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the learner, the teacher's writing is roughly tuned to learners' language proficiency levels. In most cases, overt error correction is not done in the journals. This is one place where learners may write freely, without focusing primarily on form and correctness. There are many other opportunities—on extended assignments for which multiple drafts are written and commented on—in which teachers and learners can focus on correct form.

What Are the Benefits?

Extended contact time with learners. Teachers have very little time to spend with individual learners, and dialogue journal writing extends that time. This time can not only build strong personal and intellectual ties, but it can also give learners access to the knowledge of a member of the new language and culture, and to the teacher, detailed knowledge about the learner's strengths and needs. The writers, may, for example, write about the learner's native culture and language, problems adjusting to the new culture, and educational and employment opportunities and procedures in this country. Through this relationship, the learner has regular opportunities to reflect on new experiences and emerging knowledge and to think through with another individual ideas, problems, and important choices.

Management of classes with learners of varying language, ability, and interest levels. All learners, no matter what their language or literacy levels, can participate in the dialogue journal activity to some extent, from the first day of class. Because learners' dialogue journal entries give continual direct and indirect feedback about what they understand in class as well as about their language progress, the teacher receives information that can lead to individualized instruction for each learner.

Assessment of learner needs and progress. Having learners write about what they want to learn and why is an excellent way for teachers to conduct needs assessments. Learners can respond in the journal to questions like, "Where do you use English?" "What language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, use of vocabulary, use of grammar) are you interested in developing?" and "Where are you having the most difficulty with English?" (See Bello, 1997; Weddell & Van Duzer, 1997 for ideas.) The writing itself, of course, gives teachers valuable information about what learners know and are able to do in writing. If learners agree, specific dialogue journal entries can be included in a portfolio to demonstrate progress.

Facilitation of language learning. The primary focus of dialogue journal writing is topics and issues of interest to learners rather than correct form. The teacher's written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the learner's proficiency level; thus, the teacher's entries can provide reading texts that are challenging but also comprehensible, because they relate to what the learner has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher's writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style, and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. As learners continue to write and read the teacher's writing, they are likely to develop confidence in their own ability to express themselves in writing. Many teachers using dialogue journals report that the learners' writing becomes more fluent, interesting, and correct over time, and that the writing done in dialogue journals serves as the basis for other writing (McGrail, 1996).

What Are the Challenges?

Correctness of the writing. Some teachers and learners worry if the form of the learners' writing is not perfectly correct. There are a number of ways in which writing form and correctness can be taken into consideration without interrupting the communication or distracting from the meaning. The teacher can point out to learners that his or her response to their writing in the journal can serve as a model of correct English usage and show them how to compare this model with their own writing. For example, if a learner writes, "Yesterday class go library look at picture books," the teacher might respond with, "Yesterday our class went to the library to look at picture books for parents to read with their children. Did you find some books that you want to read with your children?" The teacher might also add a "grammatical P.S." to the end of the message and let learners know that they can check that area for corrections. For example,

> "Yesterday we go." "Yesterday we went."
> "I have four son, two daughter." "I have four sons and two daughters."

The teacher might also conduct a brief class lesson on spelling, grammatical, or stylistic errors that are commonly made in the journals of several class members or discuss these in individual conferences with learners.

Even with these nonintrusive methods of "correcting," it is important to let learners know that their errors are not being pointed out because they are expected to write perfectly. They are expected to write meaningfully, and their journal writing provides a context for examining the form of their writing, if that is appropriate and helpful. Learners often want explicit correction; working out ways in which to provide correction in the journal or during class can be an important component of the dialogue journal process.

Time to respond to learners' writing. Many teachers find it difficult to find time to read and respond to learner entries. To address this, some teachers respond during class while learners are writing or working on an assignment or test. Some respond regularly but not to all entries, or to some classes and not others, or to different classes at different times. Some create writing groups among learners who write and respond to each other, with the teacher entering in from time to time. Teachers who have been successful with dialogue journals have worked out ways to manage the process (see Peyton & Staton, 1996), and they report that the time is well spent. The knowledge they gain about learners' interests and problems and the feedback they receive about ongoing work and activities serve as the basis for planning and instruction.

Writing that is overly personal. The writing of some learners may become more personal than the teacher feels comfortable with. Issues of privacy, confidentiality, and self disclosure should be worked out clearly with learners so that they and the teacher are comfortable. Of course, if a learner reveals information about situations that may be harmful to anyone in the class or program, this information must be reported and dealt with. (See Mlynarczyk, in press, for discussion of levels of privacy and confidentiality of the writing; Peyton, 1996, for further discussion of ways to address challenges generally.)

What Are the Logistics?

Materials. Dialogue journals may be exchanged on paper in bound, easily transportable notebooks or electronically. Teachers and learners in programs with access to computers may exchange computer disks or interact through e-mail. E-mail and listserv messages allow for group as well as one-on-one interactions.

Frequency of writing. The writing must be done regularly, but the frequency depends on the number of learners involved, the length of the class, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and learners. Most teachers prefer to give learners time to write during class—at the beginning as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition—or the teacher may let the learners choose a time for writing in their journals. Ten to fifteen minutes is usually adequate to read the teacher's entry and write a new one.

Length of writing. Some teachers initially set a minimum (e.g., three sentences) that learners must write, and after the

process is in place, leave the amount of writing up to the learner. Learners should understand that long, polished pieces are not required.

Writing instructions. Learners can be told that they will be participating in a continuing, private, written conversation with the teacher (or with another learner or group of learners, depending on the desired set up), who will write back regularly. The mechanics of when to write, when to turn the journals in or give them to the writing partner, and when they will be responded to and returned should also be worked out.

Writing topics. Topics for dialogue journal writing may be left up to learners and evolve freely or may be shaped by curriculum topics and goals (see Bello, 1997; Mlynarczyk, in press, for ideas). If needed or desired, the teacher might suggest one or two possible topics, hand out a list of ideas, or lead the class in brainstorming topics together. The class might also create a list of vocabulary related to a topic, which learners can then use in their journal writing. If the class is working on a particular theme (such as health), journal topics might relate to and expand on that theme. Writing might also respond to a stimulus such as a piece of music, a photograph or drawing, a field trip, a movie, a piece of literature (a story or a poem), or other types of writing (newspaper articles, essays, writings of other learners).

Journal partners do not have to be teachers. Learners can write with each other, with program tutors or aides, or with other classes of learners (e.g., adult learners who are more proficient in English and more familiar with U.S. culture; see, for example, Strever & Newman, 1997). The teacher or writing partner should enter into the journal interaction as a good conversationalist, an interesting writer, an engaged listener, and a colleague. The goal is to be responsive to topics and concerns, to ask questions, to introduce topics, and to write about oneself. Teacher entries that simply echo what the learner wrote or that ask a lot of questions can stifle rather than promote interaction.

Finally, everyone involved should relax and enjoy the writing. For many teachers, reading and writing in dialogue journals is one of the best parts of their instruction—a wonderful time to reflect, find out about the people with whom they are spending the term or year, and think together with learners about where their work is taking them.

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Additional Resources

An online bibliography lists publications about dialogue journal practice and research with many different learner populations (Peyton & Staton, 2000) <www.cal.org/ncle/dialogj.htm>

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